

VSDB Consolidation Task Force

Focus Group Report - The Findings

The Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind (VSDBs) Consolidation Task Force, at their June 3-4, 2003 meeting, agreed that public and stakeholder input into their task of developing a plan of implementation for consolidating services for the deaf and/or blind and multi-disabled students served by Virginia's two schools for these students was important to their deliberations. As a result, it was decided that public and stakeholder comments would be collected through the following means: a public comment period at Task Force meetings, a public comment mailbox on the Department of Education's website, public hearings, and focus groups. This report is a summary of the findings obtained through the focus groups.

Nine focus groups were conducted July 17 through August 18, 2003. A total of 73 participants participated. Dr. Karen Trump, working with the superintendents of the two schools and through other means, identified the participants and extended the invitations to participants. The following groups participated in a focused discussion about consolidation of services:

- Two parent groups (Hampton – 8 participants, Staunton – 4 participants)
- Two VSDB personnel groups (Staunton – 12 participants, Hampton – 12 participants)
- Three alumni groups (Richmond – 5 participants, Hampton – 5 participants, Fairfax – 3 participants)
- One group of public school special education administrators (Richmond – 12 participants)
- One group of consumer organization representatives (Fairfax – 12 participants).

At each focus group session, participant comments were recorded on flipchart paper. The recorded information was then e-mailed or mailed to participants so they could check to see that their comments had been accurately recorded. In addition, they were given the opportunity to add additional information should they desire to do so after a review of the recorded information. Fourteen individuals added additional comments or clarified their existing comments.

The Questions

All groups were asked questions targeted to the seven options that had been developed by the Task Force at their June 3-4 meeting. In addition, participants in all groups were asked to contribute additional options for consolidation of services. They were also asked to suggest criteria the Task Force could use in their decision-making. All participants were asked a question about the appropriate length of time for a student to travel from their home to the school in order to receive services.

The parent and VSDB personnel groups were asked what steps should be taken by local school divisions and the Department of Education to ensure that students receive an appropriate education should the schools be closed and they returned to the localities for services. They were also asked to suggest what additional services and programs are needed at the VSDBs should one or both schools remain open and what transition steps should be taken for the option of serving students at one site.

The VSDB personnel groups were asked what could be done to support school staff to make the transition to alternate employment should one or both of the schools be closed.

The alumni groups were asked questions regarding the need for a residential program, what programs and services they would like to see started at the VSDBs that are not currently available, and what kinds of supports and services families of students with sensory impairments need in their communities.

The special education administrators and consumer organization representatives were asked, in addition to the questions asked of all groups, the following:

- whether there was a need for residential services for students with sensory impairments,
- what local school divisions need to do to improve services for sensory impaired students,
- what state-level initiatives are needed to assist local school divisions to serve students with sensory impairments, and
- what other services and programs are needed from the VSDBs that are not currently available.

At the end of each group session, participants were given an opportunity to make any comments they thought they had not an opportunity to make during the presentation of the questions by the facilitator.

Major Findings

There was general agreement on the following findings:

- **Both schools should remain open.** Participants in all the focus groups exhibited a great deal of loyalty to the two schools, stressing what the schools had meant to them in their development or in the development of others. Parents related the time-consuming, frustrating and often disappointing experiences they had had with public schools in obtaining services for their child and his/her special needs. To them the school represented their best hope in obtaining services for their child for her/his academic and social growth. They had not been disappointed with services received at the VSDBs.

Alumni spoke of how their school experiences had served them well in life, whether it was in obtaining a skill for which they were able to obtain employment or in acquiring the leadership skills and confidence to interact in their communities after they left the school.

Special education administrators and consumer organization representatives saw the schools as an option on a continuum of services that was appropriate and necessary for some students but not all.

- **The residential program is important to the development of the child.** The importance of a residential program to the academic and social development of the student was given as the primary reason the schools should remain open instead of returning students to local schools for services. It was felt that it is in the dorm life that a student learns life skills and discipline and it is in the after-school activities that a student has the opportunity to perform leadership roles, participate in team sports, and interact with others in a peer group.

Participants in the group of special education administrators and the group of consumer organization representatives felt that where students can be mainstreamed they should be mainstreamed but for those students for which mainstreaming is not an appropriate choice, a residential program is important to their development.

Personnel stated that if students and their families don't have access to a residential program within the state, some students would leave the state for services and others would return to the public schools where the students' needs would not be addressed adequately thus hampering their academic and social development.

- **There is no support for eliminating the high school functions at both schools with students returning to local schools and consolidating the elementary school at one site.** Personnel related that students often arrive at the schools in the middle and high school years when they are failing or otherwise not doing well in their local schools. In addition, their behavior may have become a management issue at their local school and for their parents. This is also a time when peer groups are most important to the student's development.
- **There is no support for eliminating the program for blind/visually-impaired students and serving only students with hearing impairments.** One person called this option discriminatory and another person stated this only pits one disability against another. It was felt the students' needs were similar and there was a need to serve students with those needs in a residential setting.
- **There is a strong desire that a decision be made and implemented.** There was consensus the issue of consolidation has been studied much too long and a decision needs to be made now. It was stated the uncertainty is stressful to parents particularly for parents who have a child at the school in Hampton for the perception exists that if one school closes it will be the Hampton school. It was also reported the uncertainty is affecting recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and staff at the VSDBM-Hampton.

Findings and Comments Relative to the Seven Options and Other Issues

Option #1: Leave both schools open but with changes – functions downsized, sharing of space with other entities, upgrading the facilities for another type of student, etc.

Participants were asked to suggest additional changes that should be considered by the Task Force. Participants, overwhelmingly, took the opportunity to say both schools should remain open with present services enhanced. Few additional changes were suggested with comments made on the changes proposed by the Task Force. Comments included:

- Add additional students – blind or deaf and emotionally disturbed students (parent, special education administrator); students with deafness or blindness as a secondary disability (parent); students that are presently being sent out of the state for services – the deaf emotionally disturbed student, the learning disabled, and multi-disabled (special education administrator)
- Create an immersion school to teach public school students and others to sign.
- Consideration should be given to teaching ASL as a foreign language (consumer organization representative)
- Provide a residential program for students with other disabilities using Comprehensive Services Act funds (consumer organization representative)
- State develop and support satellite sites throughout the state that would be available to assist children and their families to get services. The students would be funnel into the schools should there be a need for residential services (personnel)
- Seek out additional organizations to share space on the schools' campuses (parent); consider adding only those entities to the campuses that are compatible with the present population (parent)

Option #2: Consolidate the schools to one of the current locations.

Participants mentioned travel time as being a major concern should this option become a reality. This included a concern for the distance between the school and the child's home. This was a particular concern for multi-disabled students. The following comments were made:

- Some students may have to become residential students rather than day students (parent)
- Separation by distance increases the stress levels for children and their families (parent); a student expected to move to a new location may lose

their sense of community because of the distance from their home (alumnus)

- The students that will be required to move will experience a loss requiring adaption to new surroundings and staff (parent)
- Travel time for some students will be greatly increased (parent, alumnus)
- Travel time for multi-disabled student with special medical needs (seizures) will be problematic (personnel, parent); multi-disabled students are often medically fragile and it is unreasonable to transport them for great distances (consumer organization representative); it would be more physically taxing for the multi-disabled student (parent)
- Students may return to local school divisions and become isolated within their community/school rather than move to the new school (special education administrator, alumnus)
- Transportation for the multi-disabled student would force some students to be mainstreamed to the local school division even if the appropriate services could not be provided for them (alumnus)
- It could limit involvement of parents in the school life of their child (alumnus)
- Military families in the Hampton Roads area need the services of the school at Hampton to reduce the stress to the family already burdened by the disruption of military moves and periodic deployment of a parent. (consumer organization representative)

Other impacts:

- Staff will be impacted if their school is the one to close (special education administrator, alumnus)

There was limited support for the consolidation at one site option. Reasons given by those who did support this option include:

- Consolidation could reduce the competition for resources between the two schools (special education administrator)
- Consolidation would be good in that funds from both sites could be used in one place to upgrade the facilities and programs as well as obtain needed qualified staff (parent, personnel)
- The increased numbers of students at one school could enhance the program opportunities for all students (special education administrator)
- If all the deaf students were at one site, there would be an increased identity for the school which could possibly result in a rise in enrollment (alumnus)
- One school for the blind should remain an option in the continuum of services. Although such a facility is not appropriate for all blind/visually impaired students, it is clearly the best option for some students (personnel)

- One site could be sold and the funds used to address ADA standards (personnel)

Comments were made regarding the ability of each school to meet the needs of students from the other site:

- The Hampton facility can handle the requirements of multi-disabled because the terrain is flat. Concern was expressed with “runaway wheelchairs” at Staunton and its “hilly” terrain (personnel)
- Military personnel are assigned to the Hampton Roads area because of the location of the school (personnel)
- Job skills training available at one location may not be available at the other location (personnel). Personnel at both sites felt there would be a lack of job skills training at the other site.

Option #3: Close both schools and relocate the school at another location.

Participants stressed that their responses to the option of one school closing were applicable to this option. There would be travel time issues, the uprooting of everybody (students and staff), the inability of parents (not living nearby) to become involved in their child’s activities, and concern for military families needing services, particularly for multi-disabled children if the site is not in the Hampton Roads/Tidewater area. The following additional concerns were raised relative to this option:

- Both schools are a part of the communities within which they exist. There is a history and a sense of community in their respective communities. Both communities are comfortable with and accepting of the students. This would be lost (parent, personnel, alumnus)
- There is a network of community organizations providing services to the existing schools and the students (consumer organization representative)
- There may be an inability for the “new” school to provide services, due to lack of expertise, resources, money or desire (consumer organization representative); could the needed staff be attracted to a new location? It may be hard to find staff with specialized skills in the new location (alumnus, personnel)
- It may cost more to close both and build new facility (parent)
- Money for building a new school could be put toward education at the current sites (alumnus)

However, there was limited support for the option of closing both schools and locating the school to another location. The following comments were made in support of the option:

- Major infrastructure needs exist at both schools. It is a challenge to honor the ADA requirements of historical buildings. The maintenance on a new facility may be less (parent)
- Shutting both schools and moving to a new location will be less costly. It is taking too much money to maintain current sites. Put the dollars into a new facility that meets codes (personnel)
- No other state has two school facilities and the ones we have require major repairs. It would be economically best to close both and relocate to a place requiring less repair, centrally located, possibly in Charlottesville (consumer organization representative)
- It would reduce the competition for funds between the two schools (personnel)
- If consolidating whether to one school or a new location, the goal should be to build a really strong quality program rather than to build as a “last alternative” (personnel)
- Consolidation of the two schools could facilitate creation of one “State of the Art” institution without competing for funds (personnel)
- New location needs to be geographically placed so it is not a barrier to parents (parent)
- When looking for a location look at the interstate road networks (personnel)
- The school should be in a metropolitan area where there is access to public transportation so students can be independent and move around in the community (consumer organization representative)

Option #4: Close both schools and download functions to regional, local divisions

There was no support for this option. Parents spoke of their frustration in dealing with local school divisions in getting the appropriate education for their child before resorting to requesting admission to one of the VSDBs. Alumni shared their negative experiences as well. Special education administrators acknowledged that local schools would not be able to provide the level of experiences the students now receive at the schools. There was also strong support for the residential component that is now offered by the two schools that the local schools could not provide. The following comments were made:

- Deafness and vision impairments are low incidence disability populations. Closing both schools and returning the hearing and visual impaired students to local schools will result in poor educational experiences for students in most localities (consumer organization representative)
- Local numbers are so small that students wouldn’t be apart of the deaf culture which is important for their development (special education director)
- Deaf education requires a critical mass of students (parent)
- This option would destroy the deaf student’s identity as the deaf schools teach students what it is like to be deaf (alumnus)

- The behaviors of many students improve after coming to VSDB. Their behavior may become a problem if returned to local school. Their academic learning may also regress (personnel)
- Students need to communicate directly with the teacher instead of through an interpreter; there are few if any deaf teachers in local schools (parent)
- When there is one interpreter with a deaf student, the interpreter will not pay attention 100% to the deaf student and a hearing environment is not a healthy environment emotionally for a deaf student (alumnus)
- Higher interpreter skills are available at VSDBs than local divisions can find/provide (special education administrator). With interpreters there is so much information that is lost. Seventy-five percent of school interpreters do not have Level 3 certification (alumnus)
- Small rural communities find it almost impossible to find qualified teachers and interpreters causing a decrease in the academic skills of students (special education administrator, parent)
- If students are returned to local school divisions, participation in extra-curricular activities would be limited because of a lack of interpreters (alumnus)
- Multi-disabled services in small school divisions are contracted out to other providers – some are too far away to provide the appropriate level of service (special education director). Will services be provided daily rather than weekly (parent)?
- Physical therapy and occupational therapy would not be available in the school setting because schools are focused on academics instead of the total child (personnel). Therapists/specialists may be serving multiple school settings thus less service is available to each child served (parent)
- There may be a higher cost for services at the local level but the amount of services provided would likely be less (special education director)
- Local schools do not have money to accommodate the students' needs causing students to suffer more (alumnus)
- If this option is implemented, the students will be left behind, working in opposition to the new program, No Child Left Behind (personnel)
- There would be no adult or possibly older youth deaf or blind role models for students (parent)
- Labeling and victimization of the students may occur (personnel)
- Family difficulties or insufficiencies that prevent families from coping with the additional stress of raising and educating a child with a disability will increase (consumer organization representative)
- If both schools are closed, deaf students will choose to go to the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C. (personnel)

Option #5: Close the high school (with students returning to local school divisions) and consolidate the elementary schools to one location

There was no support for this option. The sentiment was that the schools are more critical at the middle and high school levels than elementary. Participants shared the following perspectives:

- Middle and high school is often when students go to VSDBs because it is too far for a younger child to be away from home and the student's needs expand as they advance in their schooling/development (special education director)
- By middle/high school, a child is tired of being the "cute little deaf or blind child" who is working so hard and who always has another person (interpreter) with them in the classroom, on dates, at cheerleading practice, and sports (special education administrator)
- If a child returns to school divisions after elementary school to be mainstreamed and is assigned a Level 1 interpreter that can't interpret correctly then the child will get blamed for poor performance or what he doesn't know when it wasn't the child's fault (consumer organization representative)
- Being a part of a peer group is an important part of the teen experience/development of the child (parent).
- This option ignores the development of youth and such social issues as dating. Most interpreters are female so what does this do for a male or female deaf student trying to talk with a student of another gender using an interpreter (consumer organization representative)?
- Students need guidance/support/training to be successful. It is important to be trained by a teacher who knows the culture/language and can recognize what is going on in the life of the child who is blind/deaf (alumnus)
- Students need to gain independence which they won't obtain in the public schools (alumnus)
- When students return to the mainstream it is disruptive for the deaf student and the hearing community (alumnus)
- When children are younger it is easier to mainstream them, materials and subject matter are easier to follow than when older. Harder materials require more one-on-one attention (alumnus)
- Younger students need older students to look up to in order to understand what they can become (alumnus)
- If students were close to Northern Virginia or Virginia Beach, they would get services but what about those in small school divisions, those students would suffer (personnel)
- The current school is helping the children pass the SOLs but this would not happen at the local level because of the lack of one-on-one learning available now (parent)

Option #6: Eliminate the element of blind, visually impaired from the schools and serve only the deaf and hard of hearing students

There was no support for this option. It was felt that blind and visually impaired students benefit from the interaction with the deaf and hard of hearing students. The following comments were made regarding this option:

- This is a form of discrimination (parent)
- Take this option off the table because it pits one disability against another and the reasons for placing the students are similar with different outcomes (special education administrator)
- For one child (from my division) there was increased mobility, learning of Braille, independence, a change in the dynamics of the family structure, and increased academic skills that the local school couldn't have done for this child (special education director)
- Some parents tend to be overprotective and prevent practice of skills such as cane travel. The schools teach independence and don't pamper the student. The students become more independent at the schools than in the mainstreamed schools (alumnus)
- What about the multi-disabled child? This leaves them out (personnel)

Option #7: Schools serve as technical education centers to local divisions with students returning to local school divisions

There was support for the school(s) serving as technical education centers to local division but only if students were present. It was felt that if the schools were to be technical education centers, students needed to be present so a learning laboratory could be created for greater learning. Some stated that the schools had served as resource centers in the past and done outreach but with the budget reductions this function had ceased to exist other than on an informal basis. Other comments:

- Might be a good use of space not presently being used (alumnus)
- Resources are needed to make this happen (consumer organization representative)
- Remove the responsibility from the Training and Technical Education Centers (T-TACs) for hearing impaired/vision impaired students and restore it to the VSDBs with the appropriate funding. More expertise exists at the schools for serving these students than exists at the T-TACs (consumer organization representative)
- Merge this option with option #1, keeping both schools open (alumnus)

Additional Options for the Task Force's Consideration

There were few additional options offered. The participants continued to focus on the continuation of the existing school(s) or elaborated on ideas already listed by the Task Force. The following comments were made:

- Have regional/local divisions take over administrative functions with students remaining at the two schools (parent)
- Reorganize the structure so the Department of Education would supervise all special education in the state, mainstreaming administration, and removing competition relative to budget (parent)
- Turn the blind education program for visually impaired students over to the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (consumer organization representative)
- Title I designation be given to both schools (assistance with budget) (parent)
- Create a Governor's School for the deaf and the blind here (Staunton) (personnel)
- The VSDBs become their own Local Educational Agency (LEA) so they can take full responsibility for the students (special education administrator)
- Use the schools as training centers for teachers who need to develop skills working with students with these disabilities or other students (consumer organization representative)
- Increase the number of other entities to fill the vacant space (special education director)
- Provide technical assistance through the T-TACs (special education directors). Existing schools need to be technical education centers to give consistency to programs statewide (personnel)

Importance of a Residential Program to the Development of a Student

There was a consensus that there is a need for a residential program to serve deaf and hard of hearing students and blind and visually impaired students as well as multi-disabled students. One special education administrator stated there needs to be a continuum of services and choices available to local schools as well as parents. The primary reasons given for the continuation of a residential program included:

- Students need to be in a community of like persons where they have peers and can interact with them outside the academic program (personnel)
- Students need opportunities beyond academics to perform in leadership roles, for socialization, to learn life skills, and to participate in sports. These opportunities would not be available to the student in local schools (alumnus, personnel)
- Life skill training happens in the dorms (alumnus)
- Students get skills that transfer directly over to academics – residential skills such as life skills, independence, and problem solving go hand-in-hand with academic training (special education director)
- The program offers technical support for the students: TTY, phone signals, closed caption and door signals, that would not be available elsewhere (alumnus)
- The residential program provides discipline that is often not available in the home. Parents are often overprotective (alumnus)
- The residential program should be a 12-month program (consumer organization representative)

Needed Changes/Accommodations by Local Schools should Students Return

Participants in all the groups expressed concerns regarding the local schools' capacity to serve the students in a manner that would enhance the ability of the students to thrive and reach their potential, whether academically or socially. There were three primary concerns:

- The lack of skilled staff, particularly interpreters for the deaf students
- The lack of role models, i.e., deaf or blind staff and older deaf or blind students
- Lack of a critical mass of "like" students, with the student being isolated among a hearing/seeing population

Participants suggested the following needed to be in place to support the development and growth of students should they return to local schools:

- Inclusion of deaf and blind individuals in decision-making and teaching roles (consumer organization representative)
- Assistive technology for the blind or deaf student (parent)
- Qualified medical staff on site for multi-disabled students (parent)
- Smaller classrooms, more self-contained classrooms, more one-to-one learning opportunities (parent)
- Increased security for those that can't protect themselves (the multi-disabled child, in particular) (parent)
- ASL taught as a foreign language and available to all students (personnel)
- Permit or require vision impaired students to take additional time to finish school (2 years) so can learn Braille (personnel)
- All staff and students learn ASL so they can sign (parent). Interpreters create a lag in learning, discussion, and involvement in the classroom (alumnus)
- Critical mass of students with like disabilities (special education director)
- Continuation of childcare. The residential program provides childcare. Will the schools provide the same (parent)?
- Summer programs (parent)

State-Level Initiatives needed to assist Local School Division to serve Students with Sensory Impairments

Participants in the special education administrators and consumer organization representatives groups were asked if there were state-level initiatives that would be helpful in assisting the local school divisions to address the needs of sensory impaired students. Their responses:

- Programs are needed to develop skilled interpreters at a higher level than are presently being provided by the community college system in training Level 1 interpreters (special education administrator); interpreters need to be required to reach higher interpreter levels if they are at Level 1 (consumer organization representative)

- Colleges need to establish a program with DOE providing dollars to endorse students in the fields of hearing and vision impairments (special education administrator)
- The state needs to give leadership to the recruitment and training of appropriate staff (all staff needed to address the needs of these students) (special education administrators)
- Abolish the waiver system (consumer organization representative)
- Train deaf education teachers and interpreters (consumer organization representative); consider joining with another state for an initiative to train teachers such as was done for veterinary medicine students (joint effort between Virginia Tech and University of Maryland) (consumer organization representative)
- Make more assistive equipment and materials available to support the education of deaf and blind students (consumer organization representative)

Needed Community Supports if Students Return to Local School Divisions

Parents and alumni identified the following community supports that they would like to see should children return to the community:

- Respite programs for the multi-disabled student and their families (parent)
- More summer camps, recreational program, enrichment opportunities, such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters (parent)
- Summer programs that include deaf instructors and other deaf students (parent)
- Public transportation (parent)
- Large deaf community (parent)
- Family physicians that accept Medicaid (parent)
- Transitional services for job, life skills, and social skills so child can become independent (parent)
- Strengthen communications between school and families (alumnus)
- Family support services and education so family members can learn sign language and obtain necessary information to support the child (parent, alumnus)
- Financial assistance for childcare (parent)

Staff Support should One or Both Schools Close

Participants in the personnel groups identified the following supports that would be helpful to them in the event of a school closing:

- Provide incentives for staff/students to stay until facility is closed. There was a concern that staff would leave during the transition period further hampering the development of the students on site.
- Early retirement for those eligible
- Job sharing
- Retraining for staff with state paying the fees
- Job placement/employment with other agencies for all staff
- Provide the state severance package
- Provision of pay until another job is located

Programs/Services that should be added at One or Both Schools should They Remain Open

Participants in the parent, personnel, and alumni groups supported restoring programs and services that had been eliminated due to budget reductions in recent years. One parent questioned why reductions in funding had occurred at the schools when funding to K through 12 programs had not been reduced. He, and other participants in the group, saw this as being discriminatory toward the populations being served by the two schools. It was suggested that the following programs and services needed to be restored/added:

- Vocational programs with an expansion of what presently exists and a movement to those programs where jobs are readily available (personnel, alumnus, consumer organization representative, parent). Collaboration with vocational training centers in the area of the schools was seen as a positive (alumnus). It was thought that additional collaborations are needed.
- Enhanced teleconference facilities so programs can be provided in situations where the onsite staff does not have the expertise to provide (personnel)
- Enhanced technology program with computers used daily along with enhanced adaptive equipment (but not letting Braille skills falter either) (alumnus)
- Schools become accredited (alumnus)
- School(s) offer an advanced and standard diploma for students (special education director)
- Provision of extended school year services so services called for in the IEP can be addressed by the school(s) rather returning the students to the local school division for the service during the summer (special education director)
- Summer programs (special education administrator), SOL summer school (parent)
- Sports and athletics – enhancement of facilities to support a recreational program at both schools with a special request for an aquatic center at Hampton (personnel)
- After-school activities, such as art, drama, music classes (parent, personnel)
- Parent/family weekends so parents can learn ASL and interact with children (alumnus, personnel)
- Parent Advisory Committee with a Parent Coordinator on staff (parent)
- Satellite parent groups (personnel)
- Cochlear implant program with training for staff (parent, personnel)
- Electives added to curriculum (parent)
- Alumni interaction with students (parent)
- Libraries upgraded (parent, personnel)
- Intern program with colleges and universities (parent, personnel)
- Enhance specialized services and relationships with local vocational rehabilitative centers (parent)
- More services for the learning disabled (consumer organization representative)
- A more collaborative relationship between the school and the local school division (consumer organization representative)
- Deaf awareness training, more adult education (consumer organization representative)

- Programs for students who need a short-term intervention to address a specific need after which they can return to the local school, i.e., to learn ASL or read Braille (special education administrator, consumer organization representative, alumnus)
- Funding should be restored so day students can participate in after-school programs and activities
- Students living within a 35 –mile radius (Staunton) can be residential students thus benefiting from the residential program (parent, special education administrator)
- Programs that involve students working within the local public schools to the schools to help transition them back to the public schools before sending them back (alumnus)
- All campuses and facilities should be ADA compliant (parent)

Issue of Travel Time for Students

Participants in all the groups were asked how much travel was appropriate for a student with a sensory impairment as well as for a child with multiple disabilities. Participants in the consumer organizations' representative group felt the time was dependent on the severity and nature of the disability and the age of the child. There was a general sense among some participants that more than 2 hours was too much for a child with a sensory impairment. Other participants felt that if the child could watch TV, play and interact with others, they could travel for a greater length of time. One participant stated that some children in public schools ride a bus as much as 2 ½ hours a day. It was felt by one parent that for some children with multi-disabilities, that fifteen minutes was the limit. Several parents indicated they didn't care how long the travel time was as long as their children received the services they needed. Other comments relative to travel included:

- Quality education is more important than time on the bus (parent, alumnus)
- The issue is the quality of the bus and the opportunity to interact with other children while on the bus (parent)
- Airfare should be provided to those who must travel long distances (personnel)
- More buses are needed to cut travel time (personnel). Increase the number of buses and make the routes more direct (special education director)
- Instead of sending children home each weekend, send elementary school children home each weekend with the secondary students going less often – teen-agers are more likely to want to stay to interact with friends (personnel, parent)
- For the multi-challenged, invite the family to visit for the weekend instead of sending the child home. The family could stay in unused dorm space (personnel)
- Send the student home less often but allow them to stay for a longer period of time (alumnus)
- Family time is important for students in order to know their parents, siblings. It is important they go home on a regular basis (alumnus)
- Local school division should be responsible for the transporting of a student between school and home and there should be flexibility in how often the child goes home (consumer organization representative)

Transition Steps that are Essential should There be a Decision that Students are to be Served at One Site

There was general agreement that there would be a need for a transition plan to be developed should a decision to be made to serve students at one site, whether all students are moved to one of the existing schools or to a new location. Suggestions for what should be considered in a transition plan included the following:

- Plan carefully, allowing at least two years with those students with academic needs arriving first with the more challenged students coming later – a tiered approach that is phased in (personnel). Allow a minimum of two years for transition (parent)
- Provide an environment that supports services and enhances programs that are equal or better than the environments in the existing schools (personnel)
- Staff should be hired and trained before the first students arrive (personnel)
- The child and family need to be given an opportunity to visit the new site (parent). Possibly provide for student/family overnight visits (personnel)
- Training should be provided for all staff and students on the needs of a child with specialized needs (parent)
- Transportation issues need to be resolved before movement occurs (personnel)
- Provide orientation to community services including medical facilities (where school exists) before movement occurs (personnel)
- Develop a strategy to retain staff at both sites until the transition is complete (alumnus) – There is the concern that staff may leave once they know their facility is closing before the transition is complete.
- Have a Parent Advisory Committee in place to provide input into the transition (parent)
- The impact on local school divisions should be taken into consideration. Funds will need to be redistributed to local divisions should students return to the divisions rather than go to the new site so there will not be a drop in the quality of services to the child and family. Local divisions will also need to be alerted to the additional students that may be returning to their systems (special education administrator)
- Provide orientation for the community in which the school exists (personnel)

Suggested Criteria to be used by the Task Force in making a Decision

Overwhelming, participants thought the Task Force should use the criterion of the “best interest of the child” as their primary criterion in making a decision. They often followed this comment with the statement that the best interest of the child will include a residential program. The issue of cost was also raised as a criterion but put in the context of getting the best education for the student in terms of student outcomes. There were some that felt that cost should not be a consideration. Other criterion that were suggested:

- Consider the “No Child left Behind” initiative and where children can best be served to meet all the needs of the children (personnel)
- Education of the student has to be the consideration (alumnus)

- Ensure that a child does not get less service than the child without disabilities (parent)
- Reflect good stewardship of taxpayer funds and assure each student's access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (personnel)
- Provide the best way to meet academic and social needs of children (parent)
- Validate the authentic culture and the language of deaf child and support continuation of that culture (personnel)
- Consider the needs of the family as well as the child (alumnus)
- Consider where the majority of the population lives in addition to the issue of a central location (personnel), think about all of Virginia's children, not just those in the larger areas (personnel)
- Listen to the input from staff along with child and parent (parent)
- That which will provide the least negative impact on the child, family and staff (parent)
- No services eliminated (special education administrator)
- Funding and outcomes (special education administrator)
- Cost effectiveness (parent)

Other Comments

As often happens with focus groups, participants provided information not specially asked for through the focus group questions. A summary of the additional information follows.

- The concern exists that the Task Force does not have individuals on it that are deaf or a part of the deaf culture and therefore, couldn't possibly understand the needs of a deaf student and their families.
- The Task Force should look to other states for models. The states of Florida, Alabama, and New Mexico were mentioned as models to be reviewed (special education administrator, personnel)
- Admission requirements are unclear. Parents spoke to the difficulty of getting their child enrolled at one of the schools or even learning about the schools. Special education administrators spoke to the lack of clarity in the schools' admissions policy and why children are accepted at one site and not the other. A comment was made in the consumer organization group that VSDB-Staunton only accepts those students who have the potential to pass the SOLs, eliminating the option for the deaf student who cannot pass them.
- There needs to be a marketing effort to increase the enrollment at both schools.
- There was a concern among alumni that many parents of deaf students cannot sign and therefore, communication is a challenge at home. This was given as another reason that a residential program option is needed.
- There were a variety of ideas about additional funding for the schools. These included removing funding for interpreters in public schools and putting the funds into the two schools (alumnus), obtaining additional military impact funding (consumer organization representative), and obtaining Title I funding (parent).

- A better relationship needs to exist between the two schools. There have been hurtful comments and actions. The healing needs to start to build a healthy relationship. One school is perceived to be better than the other (personnel)
- The least restrictive environment for hearing impaired is sometimes the residential school. If Virginia closes both, then the state must send the students out of state for their education (parent).
- Virginia is not a parental choice state thus school divisions have to make the referral and many refuse to do so. Sometimes parents feel threatened by the process (parent).
- Schools need to be more aggressive in hiring deaf or blind administrative staff as role models (parent).
- The blind community thinks it is not appropriate to run two schools. Locate the blind students at one school for critical mass (consumer organization representative).
- Whatever the decision, it needs to be funded adequately.
- The question was raised: Why is it a legal/moral issue to have a residential program for deaf/blind students when there isn't one for students with other disabilities such as autism? (consumer organization representative)
- All the groups represented in the consumer organization focus group want to be "players" in the implementation of whatever decision is made.
- Currently, Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitative Center (WWRC) is providing service via contract to VSDB-Staunton for occupational, physical therapy and medical services. Should consolidation occur at Staunton, staffing required to provide these services needs to be adequate whether they are provided through a contract with WWRC or provided by employees at VSDB (the addition of staff) (consumer organization representative)
- The VSDB is a "drain" on local school programs in providing services to the schools. VSDB-Staunton is receiving special education assistance from the local school division (consumer organization representative). The Task Force should take a long view, be progressive rather than myopic in their thinking and decision-making. This is only the start of the process (personnel).

Prepared by Judy Burtner, Facilitator
 Submitted to the VSDB Consolidation Task Force
 August 27, 2003